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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ISLAMABAD 010467

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [PREL](#) [PK](#) [AADP](#) [EAID](#)
SUBJECT: ELECTION COMMISSION STARTS TO UNVEIL ITS PLAN FOR
2007 ELECTIONS - IMPLICATIONS FOR US SUPPORT

REF: ISLAMABAD 9890

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR RYAN C. CROCKER; REASON 1.4 (g)

¶1. (C) Summary: Encouraging developments out of the Election Commission of Pakistan (ECP) and from senior GOP officials indicate that US-led international pressure may be chipping away at the business-as-usual approach many expected from Pakistan,s electoral machinery. Building on over one year of USG analysis and consultations with political parties, NGOs, election officials, and international experts, the US is pursuing a multi-donor strategy that includes continued diplomatic-level dialogue backed up by technical assistance and commodities. Reftel laid out our strategy. Now is the time to move forward. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Pakistan,s new Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) met with a 15-member European Union ambassador,s delegation late last week. At that meeting, which received extensive coverage in both the broadcast and print national media, the Commissioner reiterated his commitment to overseeing free and fair parliamentary elections that will be "credible by any standard" and within the constitutionally mandated timeframe of November 15, 2007 to January 15, 2008.

¶3. (U) In his briefing for EU ambassadors, the CEC described, in essence, all elements of the assistance program the Election Commission had negotiated with USAID over the last year, including computerized voter lists, transparent ballot boxes, and Election Commission engagement with all major political parties in the development of an Electoral Code of Conduct.

¶4. (U) The computerized electoral rolls were characterized by the CEC as a "sine qua non" for free and fair elections in the 2007 national elections and those that follow in the

future. The old manual voter lists used in the past were open to manipulation and could not be updated to correct errors, add those who had reached voting age, or to remove the names of those who had died.

¶5. (U) Of particular importance to the opposition parties and local-level Election Commission officials alike was the announcement that transparent ballot boxes would be placed in each of the country,s polling stations. The opposition parties do not view transparent ballot boxes as a silver bullet that will somehow right all electoral-process wrongs, but instead regard them as an important confidence-building measure. Election officials, meanwhile, are breathing a sigh of relief at the prospect of distributing lightweight plastic boxes to polling stations instead of the ten-pound monstrosities they had to lug around in the past. (Note: This was mentioned as a particular concern of female election officials. End Note.)

¶6. (C) Post also met with the newly appointed Minister of Information over the weekend. He described his meeting earlier that day with the Election Commission Secretary. At that meeting, the Minister told the Secretary that the government wants the ECP to be more independent and to act with more confidence. (Note: On paper, Pakistan,s and India,s Election Commissions have an equal degree of independence. The difference is that India,s Chief Election Commissioners of late have flexed their muscles and made use of their independence thereby raising the quality of and respect for that country,s election process. Meanwhile, Pakistan,s CECs have traditionally been timid and behaved as if they worked for the sitting government. End Note.) The Minister of Information offered the Election Commission free access to government-owned airwaves to provide public education on voter registration and voting procedures. He

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also encouraged the Election Commission to engage with all political parties, including the opposition.

¶7. (C) Reiterating the President,s and Prime Minister,s commitment to free and fair elections, the Information Minister offered to serve as a conduit for exchange of views between the US and his bosses. He said he understands the importance the international community attaches to the upcoming elections and said that Pakistan does not want to be embarrassed.

¶8. (C) US Support for the Elections

USAID, working in close consultation over the past year with POL, political parties, NGOs, and like-minded diplomatic missions in Islamabad, has outlined a program to support the electoral process, which reflects present and projected resource envelopes, on-the-ground realities in Pakistan, and priorities identified by those who know the present system,s flaws best. Elements of the US program include the following:

--Computerized Electoral Rolls. As noted in para. 4, the Election Commission has characterized computerized voter lists as a sine qua non for free and fair elections. Without US assistance, however, this will not get done. Although the Election Commission has already started the process, our technical assistance and limited computer equipment are necessary to get the job completed by the Fall of 2007.

--Transparent Ballot Boxes. Outsiders may see these as fig leaves that cannot adequately cover Pakistan,s other electoral weaknesses. However, the importance civil society and opposition parties attach to this confidence-building measure cannot be overstated. No one is naive enough to view transparent ballot boxes as a silver bullet, but all see them as a necessary and much-appreciated step in the right direction.

--Political Party Engagement. Two of the chief criticisms of

past elections have been that the government apparatus has always mobilized to support ruling party candidates and that the Election Commission has had a closed-door policy with opposition parties. That the Election Commission has now committed to working with all political parties constitutes real progress. The UNDP will act as a public "front" in coordinating Election Commission/political party consultations while USAID programming will provide assistance to the political parties to help make the exchanges as constructive and productive as possible. (Note: This assistance is in addition to already-existing NDI programs funded by USAID and DRL that are helping political parties understand how to organize campaigns, improve internal democracy, develop messages, conduct member drives, and groom future leaders. End Note)

--Funding levels for the USG assistance outlined above total approximately \$16 million.

--Other election-related USAID programming in 2007. The above longer-term activities will be augmented by some combination of election-observation support, election-worker training, election-process assessment, and post-election after actions totaling approximately \$3 million. Decisions on the precise mix of these activities will be made once we get clarity on the type and levels of support that will be provided by other donors, most notably, DfID, the EU, Canada, Norway, Australia and UNDP.

¶9. (C) Pakistan,s political parties and politically oriented NGOs also identify interference from security and intelligence agencies as well as intimidation and violence

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tactics used by various political parties as key issues impeding free and fair elections in the past. Such issues, however, do not lend themselves to development project programming. To complement our proposed programming, these issues will continue to be talking points for the US Embassy and for representatives of all like-minded diplomatic missions in Islamabad.

¶10. (C) Comment: The US anticipated and began planning its support for the 2007 elections over one year ago. Ongoing meetings with every major political party, participation in the numerous fora where the political parties have met collectively, combined with regular meetings with politically active NGOs and listening to the concerns of national, provincial and local election officials has allowed post to understand the critical weaknesses that could impede free and fair elections in Pakistan and to gauge our response accordingly. We have found an unusual degree of agreement among these diverse actors on what they believe is necessary to improve the credibility of elections. Over the next 18 months, US programming and diplomatic dialogue will largely go toward helping the system respond to these demands and improving the dialogue between the Election Commission and the political parties that depend on it to oversee quality elections. Although some degree of back-sliding can be expected over the coming months, the attention the Election Commission and GOP are giving to upcoming elections this early in the game indicates that the international community,s message is being clearly received. We laid out our thoughts on a comprehensive election strategy in reftel. These recent developments are another indication that we are on the right track in terms of timing and substance. We need to move now. End Comment.
CROCKER